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ABSTRACT

The study was designed to increase student commitment to Christian education and was conducted in a church youth group of 150 students in grades 6-12, located in a moderate-sized county. The Wednesday evening program for 6th-12th-grade students was attended by a larger number of youth each week than the Sunday A.M. christian education program. Sunday christian education was structured, sequential and focused on learning content. Wednesday evenings were relational and fun. A coalition of leaders was convened for the purpose of creating a new design and restructuring christian education for youth. Small groups, mentoring, and innovative instructional strategies were introduced in the hope that student attendance, interest, and commitment would increase. The attendance records gauged the students' frequency of attendance over a 32-week period. Increased student interest was evidenced through a student survey. Analysis of the data revealed the students actual attendance in Christian education increased, but the proposed frequency of attendance was not met. A majority of the students indicated a heightened interest due to the small group initiatives, but the stated outcome was not realized. An inquiry of student commitment was conducted by an end-of-implementation questionnaire. Students expressed commitment to Christian education but did not meet the questionnaire expectation. Many forms of commitment were implicit in the activities and behavior of the students. Appendices contain a sample attendance record, the group survey and questionnaire. Contains 14 references. (EH)

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ED 387 413

Increasing Commitment to Christian Education for Students in Grades 6-12 Through Small Groups, Mentoring and Innovative Teaching Strategies

by

H. Grant Powell

Cluster 49

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A Practicum II Report Presented to the
Ed. D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

This practicum took place as described.

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This practicum report was submitted by H. Grant Powell under the direction of the advisor listed below. It was submitted to the Ed. D. Program in Child and Youth Studies and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova University.

Approved:

June 12, 1995

Date of Final Approval of Report

June S. Delano

June S. Delano, Ph.D.
Advisor

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Finally, and most important, is the writer's debt of gratitude to Jennifer Powell, editor, encourager, best friend, and patient wife; Joshua Grant Powell and Jacob Garrison Powell, dear sons, who help the writer evaluate priorities and daily teach what life and love really are about.

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ABSTRACT

Increasing Commitment to Christian Education for Teens in Grades 6-12 Through Small Groups, Mentoring and Innovative Teaching Strategies. Powell, H. Grant, 1995: Practicum Report, Nova Southeastern University, Ed. D. Program in Child and Youth Studies. Change Agent / Creative Teaching / Educational Improvement / Educational Innovation / Mentoring / Middle School Education / Religious Education / Secondary Education / Small Groups

This practicum was designed to increase student commitment to Christian education. The Wednesday evening program for 6th through 12th-grade students was attended by a larger number of youth each week than the Sunday A. M. Christian education program. Sunday Christian education was structured, sequential and focused on learning content. Wednesday evenings were relational and fun. Many students participating on Wednesdays did not participate on Sunday; those that did, demonstrated little interest or were required to attend by a parent or guardian.

The writer initiated change. A coalition of leaders was convened for the purpose of creating a new design, and restructuring Christian education for youth. Small groups, mentoring, and innovative instructional strategies were thus introduced in hope that student attendance, interest, and commitment would increase.

Analysis of the data revealed that the students' actual attendance in Christian education increased, but the proposed frequency of attendance was not met. A heightened interest was indicated by a large majority of the students, due to the small group initiatives, but the stated outcome was never realized. Finally, an inquiry of student commitment was conducted by means of an end-of-implementation questionnaire. Students expressed commitment to Christian education, but did not meet the questionnaire expectation. However, many forms of commitment were implicit in the activities and behavior of the students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Description of Community

The church in which this practicum was implemented is in a county of moderate size, with a population of 92,429 situated between the coast and agricultural acreage. Beautiful parks, uncrowded beaches, a mild winter climate and major league baseball spring training make this community an enjoyable place to live and to work, and to attract a clientele of seasonal guests as well. The community's economic base is diverse. Agriculture and tourism provide the predominant sources of community income. Manufacturing is virtually nonexistent; consequently, employment opportunities are limited to service industries and professional occupations. With a reputation for good schools, the school board is the largest employer in the county with over one thousand employees.

Writer's Work Setting and Role

The Work Setting

Over one hundred churches exist in this community. The church which employs the writer is one of the community's three largest parishes, providing a

wide variety of services including worship, religious education for all ages, diverse child and youth programing, musical presentations, dramatic productions, concerts, pastoral and clinical counseling, local and foreign missions, as well as education and guidance in many social concerns. Weddings, births, family illness and death are also reasons many people come to associate themselves with the church. A point of identification with the church often develops when raising a family and parents sense a need for their children's spiritual nurture. Even when individuals or families are nominally involved, they often send their children to the church for religious training, youth group, scouting programs and various social activities.

The church has an average Sunday morning attendance of 1000 with approximately 35 percent of the constituency being children from birth to age eighteen. The church employs five full time pastors including a Senior Pastor who serves as the corporate executive officer, with associate staff serving in Educational Ministries, Business Administration, Youth (adolescent) Ministries, and Worship Arts Ministries. In addition to the pastoral staff, four paid staff directors serve with Children's Ministries, Junior High Youth, Senior Adults Ministries and Single Adults Ministries.

The Writer's Role

As the Minister of Education, the writer is responsible for designing, recruiting, training, and implementing holistic educational programing for infants through senior adults. The writer has fifteen years experience in religious education and possesses an undergraduate degree in Christian Education and a graduate degree in church ministries with an emphasis in education. Serving on both State and National Boards of Christian Education has proven to be valuable experience for growth and leadership development.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

The problem was evident in that students demonstrated apathy and did not attend Sunday Christian education of their own volition. The Wednesday evening youth program for the 6th through 12th-grade students was attended by an average of 150 young people, while Sunday Christian education averaged approximately 35 students in attendance for the same population.

Formerly, four Sunday Christian education class designations were available for these students: a combined class of 6th and 7th-grade girls and boys; a class of 8th and 9th-grade girls; a class of 8th and 9th-grade boys; and a class of 10th, 11th, and 12th-grade girls and boys.

The Wednesday evening program had three group designations. The 6th and 7th-grade students gathered together. A second group was comprised of the 8th and 9th-grade teens, while the third designation of students was made up of the 10th, 11th, and 12th-grades.

The focus of the two ministries was distinctly different. Sunday Christian education was structured with teachers responsible for selecting topics and facilitating discussions. The physical set-up of the classrooms was generally linear, with students arranged by rows. The teaching method was typically a

lecture by an adult. Sessions were sequential, and the focus was more on learning content. Wednesday evenings were more outreach oriented with the focus on relationships and fun activities. Wednesday evenings provided students a place to gather with friends to enjoy contemporary Christian music, games, guest artists and speakers, and videos. Each Wednesday event stood on its own, providing a subtle, yet Christian message in a non-threatening environment.

The majority of the students in the Wednesday evening program had not attended Sunday Christian education. Students attending the Sunday program were generally required to do so by a parent or guardian and demonstrated little interest.

Problem Documentation

Evidence that a problem existed had been documented by four means. Attendance figures demonstrated a disparity of student interest and participation from Sunday morning and Wednesday evenings. An average of 150 students were attending the Wednesday Youth program, while an average of only 35 students were attending the Sunday morning Christian education.

Both Youth Ministry leadership and Christian education leadership observations determined that a student apathy toward the Christian education program existed. Interviews with the Youth Pastor, Youth Ministry Staff and Christian education Staff were conducted. The Youth Pastor acknowledged concern for students needing the instructional component that the Christian education provides, but the students appeared disinterested with Biblical instruction. Wednesday Youth Staff reported that when promotion campaigns for Sunday Christian education were conducted, students continued to exhibit

little enthusiasm. Sunday Christian education staff also observed student tardiness and limited participation in class activities or discussions.

Informal conversations between students and the writer indicated a low priority for Sunday Christian education. Common complaints were that Christian education was boring, too much like school, and that there were too few meaningful, relevant learning experiences.

Finally, the Christian education staff responsible for leadership with these students claimed that a majority of students exhibited little interest and would not elect to attend if not mandated by parents or guardians. Attendance records proved that most 6th through 12th-grade students attending Sunday Christian education generally were accompanied by parents or guardians enrolled in the concurrent Adult Bible Study Fellowship Groups. Consequently, all four sources revealed that students in the 6th through 12th-grade demonstrated apathy towards Sunday Christian education.

Causative Analysis

The causes for this problem were varied. One cause was that student relationships were seldom developed with peers or adult leaders. Consequently, struggles with issues of self-esteem and isolation common to young people, prohibited group support, acceptance and created student apathy towards an impersonal one-hour-a-week Christian education program.

A second cause was due to former educational approaches and curriculum designs. Student preferences and predispositions in terms of instructional strategies and cognitive abilities were limited. This generation of young people had been raised on *Sesame Street*, *Nintendo* and *MTV*. This orientation caused students to become accustomed to the intake of sights, sounds, and

information all at once; therefore, the single-dimensioned communication and instruction of most church volunteer Christian educators tended to bore the student.

An insufficient number of Christian education staff also contributed to the problem. A leadership deficit created a student-to-teacher ratio that prohibited the necessary bridge building of relationships. In addition to too few leaders, an insufficient amount of time limited the students' Christian education experience and interests.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

Professionals write that the evangelical Sunday School and/or the educational enterprise of the church is in decline, while others emphasize the importance of relationships and real learning. Anderson (1990) posited that 85% of Protestant churches in America are either stagnating or dying. According to Barna (1991), participants in today's church rate the church's quality of teaching and educational offerings lowest, which may explain why many Baby Boomers who returned to church after an extended period of absence, i.e. for the sake of the children, are now leaving again, disappointed that they did not receive greater benefits for their investment.

Although the evangelical community claims spiritual resources and scriptural truth, the church is still full of students struggling with issues of self image and relationships. According to Puskar and Lamb (1991), a volunteer sample of 37 male and 32 female students, the majority being 16 years of age, revealed the top social/psychological problems as: being easily embarrassed, disliking someone, impulsivity, being talked about, and image worry.

In a nationwide telephone survey conducted by the Barna Research Group, a

random sample of 710 teenagers ranging in ages from 13 to 18 were interviewed concerning a broad range of issues from values, beliefs, life-styles, and attitudes. According to the Barna Report (1991), one-fifth of the young people surveyed considered relationships with peers to be one of the biggest concerns and almost as many (18%) cited relationships with the opposite sex a major issue. Overall, young people appear most anxious about being considered normal, accepted and competent in dealing with others.

As the young person strives to relinquish the dependence upon parents, the peer group becomes a temporary replacement until a more mature autonomous functioning is possible. The search for identity becomes more salient in adolescence. Fuligni and Eccles (1993) claimed that as children enter early adolescence, a move toward mutual relationships involving less parental domination develops. This correlates with research indicating that teens discuss spiritual concerns less with parents in recent years. According to Gallup's The Religious Life of Young Americans (1991), 30% of the teens surveyed in 1983 claimed they wanted more discussions of a religious nature with their parents, compared to 15% in 1988. Reasons for the decline may be explained at least in part by findings that (in 1988) one teen in five (21%) reported that religious discussions were the subject of arguments with parents.

The Barna Report (1991) revealed that peers are often sources of pressure for teens; however, they may also provide opportunities for religious speculation and debate. Four teens in 10 (38%) report having moral issues discussed with friends; 23% have discussed the existence of God, and an afterlife; and 21% the meaning of life.

According to Fuligni and Eccles (1993), early adolescents desire increased opportunities to participate in making decisions that affect their lives. However,

if the adolescent's development is neglected, he or she may sacrifice developmentally positive aspects of life for the sake of peer relationships. The consequences of reliance on the advice of peers when making important decisions depends on the type of advice given. For example, Fuligni and Eccles posited that if early adolescent friends are achievement-oriented, a compensatory action may result if the youth is dissatisfied with his or her relationship with his or her parents. However, if the peer group engages in deviant and antisocial behavior, the reliance upon peers becomes more of a risk factor.

Finally, educators must emphasize a lifelong learning. Anderson (1992) cited there was a time when education centered on time and place. The time generally began with kindergarten and ended with high school graduation. The place was the classroom. In most circles the high school graduate was considered educated, and those who continued educational pursuits in college, or beyond, i.e., graduate degrees or post graduate degrees, spent more time in yet other places.

Learning has often been synonymous with taking in information, yet, taking in information, according to Senge (1990), is only distantly related to real learning. Learning involves a re-creating of oneself, an enabling to do something never done before. For Senge, learning involves a paradigm shift, seeing relationships and the world in new ways, extending one's capacity to create, and become a part of the generative process of life.

This has important implications for the church today. According to Barna (1990), the Christian ministry insensitive to other's time will lose people's interest and involvement. Gone are the days when church leaders can expect the community to attend services or other functions simply because the event is

sponsored by the church. The church is in intense competition for people's time in a day when they are more selective in their participation.

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Goals and Expectations

The writer's goals and expectations were that students in the target population, 6th through 12th-grades would increase attendance and demonstrate excitement and commitment to the Christian education program.

Expected Outcomes

Change was expected as specific strategies were implemented, resulting in increased student interest in Christian Education.

1. Of the 150 students presently active in the Wednesday night youth program, 75 students will attend Sunday Christian education 25 of the 32-week implementation period as indicated by the attendance records. (see Appendix A.)
2. Sixty of the 75 students will express an increased interest in Christian education evidenced through a survey at the end of the implementation. (see Appendix B.)
3. At the conclusion of the 32 weeks, 55 out of 75 students will demonstrate an increased commitment to Christian education as indicated by a questionnaire. (see Appendix C.)

Measurement of Outcomes

Outcome One

The attendance records gauged the students' frequency of attendance over a 32-week implementation period. (see Appendix A.)

Outcome Two

Increased student interest in Christian education was evidenced through a student survey. (see Appendix B.) The survey was designed to inquire of the students' interest and participation in Christian education. The survey contained eight multiple-choice questions, two closed-ended questions, and concluded with a space for students' written comments. It was the writer's desire that 60 of 75 students would answer the multiple choice questions as follows. Questions 1 through 7 would receive a response of either A or B indicating an increased interest in Christian education.

Outcome Three

The students' level of commitment was evaluated at the conclusion of the 32 weeks by means of a student questionnaire. (see Appendix C.) The questionnaire contained two multiple-choice questions to determine an increase in commitment, and one open-ended question as to how Christian education had become a relevant part of the student's life. Question 1 was designed to measure the students' perception of an increased commitment to Christian education. To indicate an increased commitment, a student would have responded to questions 1 with either A or B. For question 2, A, B, or C was the desired response.

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions

The problem was evident in that students demonstrated apathy and did not attend Sunday Christian education of their own volition. The Wednesday evening youth program for the 6th through 12th-grade students was attended by an average of 150 young people, while Sunday Christian education averaged approximately 35 students in attendance for the same population.

Students that attended Sunday Christian education demonstrated little interest and were generally required to do so by a parent or guardian. The desired goals were for an increased student attendance and demonstrated commitment to Christian education.

Similar Problems and Solutions

Anderson (1992) claimed that individuals seek meaningful relationships out of deep-felt loneliness, brought on by mobility, divorce, blended families, and individual isolation. When adolescents encounter stress and problems in their lives due to loneliness, isolation and relationship needs, some are able to cope in positive, healthy ways; others turn to negative ways of coping. In a pilot study identifying life events, common problems, stressful life situations, and coping strategies of 69 volunteer adolescents, Puskar and Lamb (1991) suggested that

prevention efforts make a great difference. Self-help groups provide adolescents a forum to explore stressful events and choices for coping. Puskar and Lamb contended these intervention efforts prove helpful in lowering adolescent suicide, levels of depression, and other maladaptive ways of coping with stressful problems. An additional benefit, according to Anderson (1992), was that support groups and self-help groups provide lasting relationships, escape from loneliness, and opportunity to address and resolve personal problems. Newton (1984) also contended that the self-help group encourages acceptance, in spite of individual fears or problems, and enhances self-esteem.

Adolescence is a time of transition from childhood into the world of the adult. According to Huber and Healy (1992), adolescence is a time of struggle as the young person answers the questions, "Who am I?" "Where do I fit?" "What will I do with my life?" "Grow Days" is the name given to a program developed by Huber and Healy for eighth grade students, designed to address the intellectual, psychological, social and spiritual needs of teens. In "Grow Days", there are no tests, no textbooks and no red pens. The program consists of adults spending time with teens one afternoon a month, getting to know them personally. Experiences are designed to develop the students' thinking and problem solving skills, helping them find their own answers. "Grow Days" is different from many other programs because it is individualized to the unique needs and concerns of each young person and emphasizes spirituality and God as a never ending source of strength.

Mentoring is often a component of leadership and effective in the educational process. According to the Barna Report (1991), more intentional discipleship (a term the church for centuries has used for mentoring) with teenagers must be developed and sustained.

The Barna Report stated:

> We tend to lose many young people between the ages of 18 and 23. Why? Because an inadequate job was done in preparing them for the chance to free themselves from the Church. They did not possess a strong enough understanding of the significance and the benefits of being a Christian. Once they encounter a chance to explore other life-style possibilities, they happily pursue those, simply because Christianity did not work for them. To literally millions of young adults and teenagers, God is not real; spirituality is a head game; church is irrelevant; religion is positive, but not helpful. (p. 54)

White-Hood (1930) claimed that modeling values and ideals requires strategic planning and a barrage of resources. The challenge is to model certain standards for young people as they grow into adulthood. According to Hammett (1993), mentoring is not merely imparting knowledge or skills to others, although he acknowledges that mentoring has both an educational and a training dimension. However, authentic Christian mentoring deals primarily with issues of maturity and integrity, and only secondarily with information and skills.

Mentoring provides a formal way to translate administrations' concerns into a supportive structure. Due to the role expectations, and intentionality of the mentors, students have been helped in developing prosocial behaviors, improving communication skills and effectively managing conflict. Instructional performance is also improved as feelings of being needed and valued increase (White-Hood, 1993). The author stated:

> Besides the personal benefits, the mentoring project improved our state assessment outcomes for writing and reading. Attendance increased,

> suspensions decreased, and more cooperative learning and teaching became possible in classrooms as students developed better social skills. Most important, students' self-esteem seemed to be raised. Our school took on a more personalized tone. (p. 78).

Christian education has traditionally been more theoretical, deductive, linear, sequential, process-oriented and standardized. However, Anderson (1992) contended that a new paradigm needs to be more practical, experiential, inductive, relational; providing leaders as models and mentors, short-term, interactive, hands-on, product oriented, issues driven, and customized to individual needs. From the literature review, it appears that intentional mentoring, small group strategies, and innovative educational approaches provide workable solutions.

Description of Selected Solution

To accomplish an increased student interest in Christian education, evidenced by a growing attendance and improved student commitment, ideas from the following solutions and strategies were generated.

Anderson (1992) posited that small, self-help groups provide lasting relationships, escape from loneliness, and opportunities to address and resolve personal problems. The writer perceived the need for developing small, self-help groups, where genuine relationships with adults could be forged with 6th through 12th-grade students. According to Schubert and Borkman (1991), gathering data, such as student roles, interests, leadership patterns, and particular traits will help when matching individuals for the purpose of facilitating effective group assignments. Consequently, the acquisition of student data became an important consideration in the developing of the small groups and

each corresponding group leaders.

In "Grow Days", there are no tests, no textbooks and no red pens (Huber and Healy, 1992). The restructuring of Christian education with 6th through 12th-grade students involved an emphasis of adult leaders spending time and developing genuine relationships with teens. Instead of just one afternoon a month, as prescribed in the "Grow Days" program, the writer proposed that adult leaders assemble with the corporate youth meeting on Wednesday evenings and with each respective small group on Sunday, in addition to frequent student contacts. Student contacts consisted of written notes, phone calls, and/or personal visits for the purpose of cultivating the student-mentor relationship. Like "Grow Days", group meeting experiences were designed to develop student thinking and problem solving skills, help students find answers, learn to ask the right questions, nurture self-esteem, and emphasize a Biblical Christianity.

White-Hood (1993) contended that mentoring improved state assessment outcomes, therefore, it was believed that an intentional mentoring, i.e. small group initiative and weekly student contacts would, likewise, result in a similar response of increased attendance and cooperative learning. When students meet together and learn to participate in a group process, interest and achievement increase. According to Leming (1993), this type of learning environment results in impressive student achievement, as well as positive social values and behavior.

Brunner and Hopfenberg (1992) posited that learning situations that motivate students to grow and succeed create lessons where students learn actively and perceive connections between the activities and real life. By implementing strategies for active learning, students are more inclined to be engaged and

committed to the church's educational programming. The writer took specific steps to ensure that instruction was not only teacher initiated or teacher dominated.

Report of Action Taken

From the literature reviewed and observations, additional ideas were generated resulting in a restructuring of the Christian education ministry for the 6th through 12th-grade students. Prior to the actual implementation the writer met with the Youth Pastor to consider possible developments and continued to meet on a weekly basis to discuss the change process. The Youth Pastor staff, consisting of a Varsity leader for students in 9th through 12th-grade and a Junior Varsity leader for students in 6th through 8th-grade, was primarily responsible for the orientation and training of adult mentor/leaders for the specific procedures and the desired outcomes. As the Minister of Christian Education, with responsibility for children, youth and adults in the church, the writer has served the Youth Ministry department as a consultant and change agent through this process.

The students and youth staff met together for a weekend retreat which provided a series of ice-breakers and initiative games designed for adult leader and student interaction. The retreat provided a relaxed environment and opportunities for both students and adults to break down barriers and to begin building relational bridges. The proposed educational model was introduced to the students and the small group concept became identified by the Youth Ministry department as "Covenant Groups". A commitment form was distributed and sent home for both students and parents to read and sign. Sixty-six students returned commitment forms to the youth ministry office.

A deviation from the writer's original plan was the moving of the Christian education module from Sunday morning to Sunday evening. When this was introduced, some students expressed hesitancy in giving up the traditional Sunday morning Christian education. As a result, members of the Youth Staff, the Youth Pastors and the writer gathered together for the purpose of reevaluating the original proposal and coalition building. A consensus of these key stakeholders determined that instead of abolishing the Sunday morning Christian education, the Covenant Groups would be offered in addition to the preexisting youth and education programs. The Sunday morning classes, therefore, were not deleted but the grading configurations were altered. An assembly of young men, 6th through 7th-grade, an assembly of young women, 6th through 7th-grade, and an assembly of young men and women, 8th through 12th-grades were formed, providing three Sunday morning youth classes. The Sunday morning curriculum departed from a Bible focus, becoming topical. Covenant Groups were added as a Sunday evening option.

Another adjustment from the writer's original proposal had to do with the time frame for the Covenant Groups. The Varsity Youth Pastor altered the 32 weeks by dividing them into two semesters. In week 17 of the implementation new groups were formed, providing opportunity for new students to participate in a Covenant Group.

The writer's original intentions were to assimilate no more than two students per group during the 32-week implementation period, maximizing the size of any group to a potential of only 10 students. However, the Varsity Youth Pastor prohibited new students from joining Covenant Groups once the group assignments were made for the first half of the 32-week implementation. This allowed time for the adult mentor/leaders to evaluate the process and to make

necessary adjustments.

Another deviation from the original proposal was the Varsity Youth Pastor's rigid attendance policy. This policy required that a student be expelled from a Covenant Group when more than two unexcused absences accrued within the first 16 weeks. In the second 16 weeks of implementation the Varsity Youth Pastor relaxed the attendance policy.

A difficulty in implementation had to do with the inadequate record keeping of the Youth Ministry department. The church's education department has traditionally kept attendance records for the children, youth, and adult departments. The Youth Ministry department only began keeping record of attendance with the advent of the Covenant Groups. The writer speculates that the actual number of students attending was higher than the recorded attendance figures. The low attendance figures were due to the negligence of the Covenant Groups adult leader/mentors in returning Group Leader Reports to the Youth Ministry office. The Group Leader Reports were the only record of student attendance, therefore the writer requested reports from the Youth Ministry office each week for an accurate accounting. Had this been conducted from the Christian education department, there would not have been as large a margin of error.

To establish the Covenant Groups, youth staff gathered pertinent information (i.e., student's name, gender, grade, and special interests) before assigning groups. In week three, a corporate meeting of youth and adult staff assembled for a mock funeral. Both students and staff eulogized certain elements of the former youth program and youth Christian education model. Following was a party to celebrate the future.

Students were assigned to homogeneous groups of eight or less. Adult men

led groups of young men, and adult women led groups of young women. The adult leader/mentors provided students with instruction in simple journal-writing techniques for the purpose of developing a tool for reflective thinking, a safe place to ask questions, and recording prayers.

Each student that turned in a Covenant Group Commitment Form received a new study Bible (New Testament) and all groups were originally assigned the gospel of John as the primary curriculum source. The Youth Pastor was given the writer's 32-week calendar plan as a guide for leader/mentors to follow, however, many of the specifics were not implemented. It became apparent that Covenant Group leader/mentors had not been introduced to the writer's instructional strategies or calendar plan. However, general instruction to study John's gospel and to encourage student journal writing was given.

In week seven the adult leader/mentors were to write notes of encouragement to each student in the group. This was to be the initial note writing exercise. However, many of the group leaders had already initiated writing notes to the students.

Students and adult leader/mentors met in a corporate worship setting with the church congregation the first Sunday evening of each month. Instead of the writer's original plan for a youth issues panel discussion, a corporate worship experience provided opportunities for the youth to speak, use and develop musical talents, offer public prayers, and inform the church body of service projects and ministry in which the students were involved.

Adult leader/mentors were encouraged to spend time with the students in addition to the Sunday Covenant Group meetings. Many Covenant Groups participated in extra-curricular activities. Covenant Group members were invited into the leader/mentors' homes for meals, taken on weekend camp outs,

field trips, and to sporting events, for the purpose of building group relationships. Mentoring of students was partially developed through the "student contact" strategies which consisted of phone calls, written notes and personal visits. The writer's proposal included a student-prepared schedule of events for the leader/mentor to attend selectively. This was not officially executed as designed; however, many leader/mentors naturally followed-up on important activities due to the genuine interest and developing relationships.

Some Covenant Group members expressed boredom regarding the Bible study to leader/mentors. The Varsity Youth Pastor granted group leaders liberty in choosing topical studies (other than the proposed gospel of John) with the perception that these would be more interesting for the students.

Other difficulties arose due to a lack of support . Certain instructional strategies (beginning with week 14 of implementation) were never considered or encouraged among the leader/mentors. Specific reasons for the non-promotion remain unknown to the writer, but it is speculated that the Youth Pastor was uncomfortable with the writer's influence in the youth program.

As proposed on the 32-week calendar plan, a group of 21 students modeled Christian charity by participating in a missions work camp to Honduras. The students served in various areas of ministry and experienced the cultural diversity of a third world country. Returning to the United States, the young people shared the work camp experience in a corporate Sunday evening worship service.

Christian service was also demonstrated by student involvement in various children's ministries in the home congregation (i.e., leading children's worship and assisting teachers in children's Sunday School). Other student ministries involved street meetings with children in low income neighborhoods and

monthly nursing home visitation, where puppets, clowning and positive messages were used to encourage.

A survey and questionnaire were distributed to 84 students during a Wednesday evening youth program in week 32 of the implementation. Student responses indicated attitudes toward Christian education i.e., the Covenant Group initiative and more specifically the small group relationships, mentors, and innovative instruction.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results

The problem addressed was a schism within the Youth Ministry department and the Christian education department's youth program. This was evidenced by two distinctly differing programs. An average of 150 young people in 6th through 12th-grades attended the Wednesday evening activities, while an average of only 35 students for the same population attended the Sunday morning Christian education.

Students complained that Christian education was boring, too much like school, and that there were too few meaningful, relevant learning experiences. The converse of the Sunday education was the Wednesday evening program with a focus on fun and relationships. Wednesday evenings provided students a place to gather with friends. Each event stood on its own, providing a subtle, yet Christian message in a non-threatening environment.

The Covenant Groups were designed for the development of small groups, mentoring relationships with caring adults, and relevant, participatory instruction. By implementing these strategies, the writer desired an improved student attendance and increased student interest and commitment to Christian education.

Outcome One

The first desired outcome was to increase attendance. Of the 150 students presently active in the Wednesday night youth program, 75 students will attend Sunday Christian education 25 of the 32-weeks of implementation as indicated by the attendance records.

It was projected that 75 students would attend Sunday Christian education. This goal was exceeded as the actual number of students participating was 78. (see Appendix A.) The second part of outcome one measured the frequency of attendance as demonstrated in Figure 1.

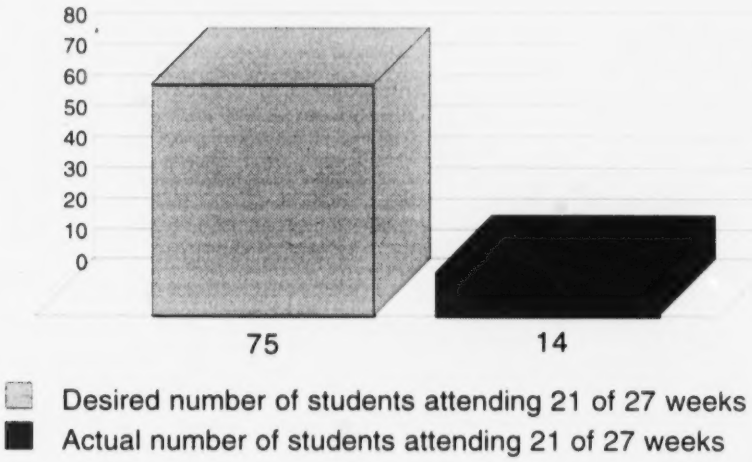

Figure 1. Number of students attending Covenant Groups.

Outcome Two

The second expected outcome stated that 60 of 75 students will express an

increased interest in Christian education evidenced through a survey at the end of the implementation. (see Appendix B.) Surveys were completed by 59 of the 78 participating students and contained 10 questions, 7 of which were used to determine students' interest.

Questions 1 through 7 were designed in such a way that a student's response of either A or B would indicate an increased interest. A response of C or D to any of the same questions would indicate no increased interest on the part of the student. Of the 59 surveyed students, all but 2 responded to all seven questions with a response of A or B as indicated in Figure 2, thus, missing the expected outcome by only 3 tallies.

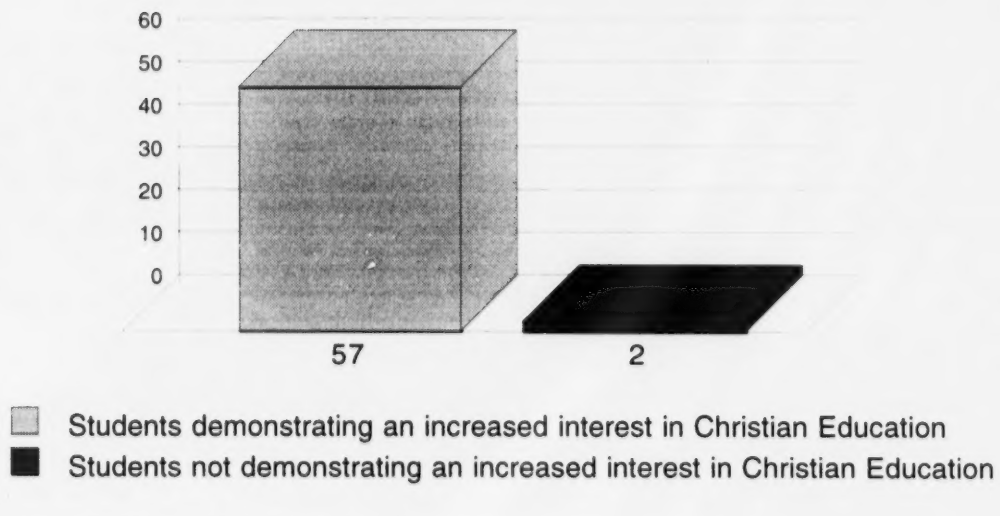

Figure 2. Student responses indicating increased interest.

Questions 8 through 10 were included in the survey for future use in

Christian education programming. These questions requested student gender, age, and preference for meeting times.

Outcome Three

The third outcome proposed that at the conclusion of the 32 weeks, 55 of 75 students would demonstrate an increased commitment to Christian education as indicated by a questionnaire. (see Appendix C.) Question 1 measured the students' perception of an increased commitment to Christian education. Figure 3 demonstrates a deficit of 5 tallies in obtaining the desired outcome.

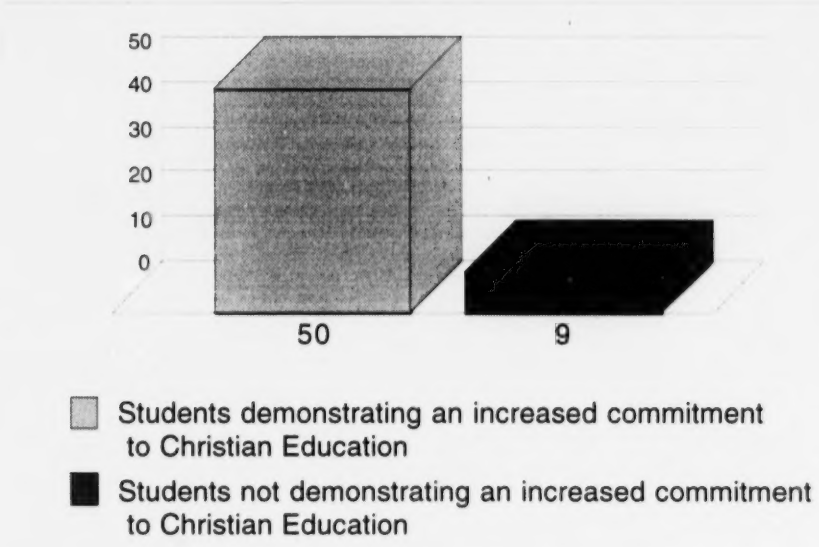

Figure 3. Responses to Covenant Group Questionnaire, question 1.

Another means by which commitment was measured was the regularity of students' journal writing. The students' commitment to this discipline was reflected in the responses to question 2, as shown in Figure 4. Obviously, the

desired outcome as measured by journal writing was not realized.

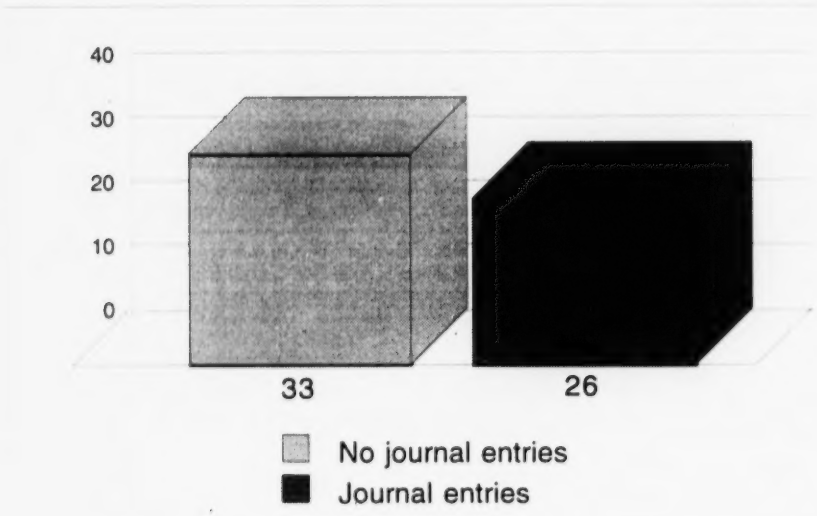

Figure 4. Responses to Covenant Group Questionnaire, question 2.

Question 3 asked for specific examples of how the Covenant Group experience had been applied to the student's life. Responses included, "I now use Biblical truth and knowledge for family discussions," "Spiritual disciplines have helped me with school," "I learned to turn problems over to God and answers were found," "I developed a confidence in faith and knowledge of Christian beliefs," "I try to do right and know there are people who know and love me."

More general responses given by the students were, "Read Bible and pray daily," "Practical applications of Bible instruction," and "Help with daily problems."

Discussion

After closer examination of the Youth Ministry Department's record keeping it became evident that the original Wednesday evening attendance figures were exaggerated. The number of 150 students would have been more appropriately estimated at 100. Therefore, the writer's goal to involve 75 students was optimistic, although accomplished and exceeded.

The outcome stated that students would attend 25 of 32 weeks of implementation. Figure 1, however, revealed that students could participate for a total of 27 weeks rather than the projected 32 weeks. The reason for this disparity was an extended holiday season when groups did not formally meet. Regardless of the difference, it was obvious the goal was not met.

Another possible reason for not realizing the outcome was the negligence of leader/mentors not returning reports to the Youth Ministry office. A majority of the group leaders did not turn in reports until the end of each 16 week period, and then attempted to reconstruct group reports from memory.

Yet another contributing factor for failing to obtain the frequency of attendance outcome was the change in policy which required that a student be expelled from a Covenant Group when more than two unexcused absences accrued within a 16 week period. During the first semester two students were dismissed from Covenant Groups. The attendance policy was relaxed in the second half of the 32-week implementation phase causing attendance to became more sporadic, according to the Varsity Youth Pastor. This, however, was not reflected in the Sample Attendance Record. (see Appendix A.)

The frequency of attendance goal was not met, however, the improved leader-student ratio created more conducive environments where students

explored stressful events and considered choices for coping, as well as developed relationships where acceptance and self-esteem were nurtured and personal concerns were addressed. Similar to "Grow Days", the program of Huber and Healy (1992), Covenant Groups consisted of adult leader/mentors investing time, and addressing the unique concerns of each young person, while emphasizing the need for nurture in Christian faith.

Even though outcome two was not met, the writer was encouraged by the 57 students that did show a heightened level of interest. However, had the leader/mentors been encouraged to follow the proposed plan, the writer speculates that the creative small group activities would have generated a greater sense of student expectation resulting in increased interest. Brunner and Hopfenberg (1992) posited that students become motivated when lesson activities are connected to real life situations. If Covenant Groups had provided more experiences requiring higher order thinking, complex reasoning, and relevant content, student interest would have been greater still.

The Covenant Group initiative was well received by both group participants and adult leadership and will continue to be a regular component of Christian education for 6th through 12th-grade students. Some specifics of the proposed plan (i.e., innovative Bible study activities, panel discussions, and quiz competitions) that were ignored have been reevaluated by the Youth Pastors and will be incorporated in the Covenant Groups next semester.

As the second outcome was designed to determine students' increased interest, outcome three measured commitment. The actual outcome was not met; however, the student responses to question 1 of the Covenant Group Questionnaire verified a significant increase in commitment to Christian education.

Question 2 attempted to measure commitment based on students' frequency of journal writing. As a result, responses did not reflect the desired level of student commitment. In retrospect, the fault of this indicator was the assumption that all students would express commitment in a single mode: journal writing. From the leader/mentor group reports, the writer discovered that commitment was expressed in the commodity of time. Students invested multiple hours in relationships, service projects, and acts of Christian charity which indicated commitment.

According to Roehlkepartain's survey (1993), three of four teenagers expressed interest in knowing how to make friends and how to be a friend. Student-to-student support was encouraged in the Covenant Groups. A group leader/mentor reported that a particular student that earlier had attempted suicide, found peer support and genuine friendship when faced with depression and personal struggles. The small groups created environments where students learned to trust one another and became committed to applying Biblical principles.

Commitment to Christian education was also evidenced when 21 students participated in a missions work camp to Honduras. According to Anderson (1992), for students to become more committed, a new paradigm of practical, experiential, inductive, relational, short-term, and hands-on Christian education needs to be developed. If this is true, the missions work camp experience met all of the criteria.

After returning to the states, a Sunday evening worship was provided for an accounting of the group's Honduras experiences. As a result of these life-changing events, the students demonstrated a growing sensitivity and commitment to Christian values.

Summary

It is critical that the church creates a supportive and nurturing context for young people, a safe place where the searching and synthesizing of students' questions can be worked out within caring relationships. If this does not happen many teens will possibly leave the church, looking elsewhere for life direction. Covenant Group ministry was designed and developed for this purpose. The small groups, mentoring relationships, and innovative, participatory instruction was intended to increase student attendance, interest and commitment to Christian education. Even though some of the outcomes were not actually met, progress was made.

Recommendations

1. The implementation, in order to be done properly and completely, is contingent upon positive collegial relationships. The building of coalitions before implementing a new venture will allow greater success in the change process. All staff should present a united front concerning the over-all initiative, particularly with the instructional strategies.

2. Periodic training for the adult leadership is essential to effectively create a common vision and unity of purpose.

3. The use of certain tools (i.e., Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and lexicons) will encourage group investigative studies and equip students for self-initiated research.

4. The coordination of small group lessons will involve interactive, hands-on activities, where students are responsible to do more than just read about Christianity. Students should be provided opportunity to decide upon group projects where activities are consistent with the Biblical instruction.

5. Provide a forum where students can demonstrate acquired knowledge and problem solving skills. A quiz competition between small groups would create an exciting challenge.

6. To measure results, scrutinize attendance procedures for accuracy and follow-up. Meticulous attention must be given to the initial data in order to correctly measure outcomes.

7. For leader/mentors to properly follow-up on students' needs, and for the program administrator to address group concerns, it is critical that leader reports be returned following each group meeting.

8. Ask students to write a personal testimony, identifying what has been experienced in the small group process, thus developing a qualitative instrument for measuring student commitment to Christian education.

Dissemination

As the practicum was implemented, several colleagues serving in Christian education and youth ministry positions inquired of the Covenant Group program and expressed interest in both the process and the results. It is hoped that this initiative with 6th through 12th-grade students will have far-reaching impact beyond the writer's particular church community or church tradition.

As an officer of the county Ministerial Association, the writer intends to make available the practicum report to nearly 100 clergy members and youth organizations within the local region. On a larger scale, prospects with the National Board of Christian Education and the Professional Association of Christian Educators (P.A.C.E.) provide excellent idioms for dissemination. The writer plans to disperse the practicum report to a broad range of church leaders (i.e. pastors, Christian educators, youth ministers, state and national

administrators) within the writer's church tradition, as well as outside the writer's tradition through the P.A.C.E. idea bank. The idea bank is a computer data base of innovative and proven ministries available to thousands of Christian leaders internationally.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE ATTENDANCE RECORD

Student Name	9/ 18	9/ 25	10/ 2	10/ 9	10/ 16	10/ 23	10/ 30	11/ 6	11/ 13	11/ 20	11/ 27	12/ 4	12/ 11	12/ 18	12/ 25	1/ 1	1/ 8	1/ 15	1/ 22	1/ 29	2/ 5	2/ 12	2/ 19	2/ 26	3/ 5	3/ 12	3/ 19	3/ 26	4/ 2	4/ 9	4/ 16	4/ 23	0
Student 1	1				1														1		1	1	1										7
Student 2	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1		1	1	1					1		1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	24
Student 3	1			1	1				1	1			1								1		1	1	1			1				11
Student 4	1	1	1																1	1	1	1			1	1							9
Student 5	1	1		1	1	1	1		1	1		1	1						1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	24
Student 6	1	1			1	1				1			1																			6
Student 7		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1						1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	25
Student 8	1	1																	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	13
Student 9	1			1	1	1													1		1				1								7
Student 10																					1	1		1	1	1							6
Student 11	1				1	1			1	1			1								1		1		1			1					10
Student 12	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	22
Student 13			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	21
Student 14																			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11
Student 15			1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1					1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	24
Student 16																			1		1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1			10
Student 17	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1							1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	23
Student 18	1								1	1											1	1			1			1					8
Student 19	1	1	1						1			1							1	1			1	1	1	1	1						13
Student 20	1								1	1			1						1		1	1	1			1							9
Student 21	1	1																	1		1	1			1	1							8
Student 22	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	25
Student 23	1	1				1													1		1			1		1	1						8
Student 24	1	1		1		1		1		1		1							1		1	1											10
Student 25	1			1					1	1			1						1		1		1		1			1					11
Student 26																			1		1			1	1	1	1						6
Student 27																			1	1	1	1			1	1							6
Student 28												1							1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					10
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Student 67	1	1		1	1	1		1	1			1							1				1	1	1								11
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Student 70		1	1	1	1														1			1											7
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Totals	51	53	30	42	42	23	15	14	17	32	11	31	24	1	0	0	0	0	61	23	54	56	42	44	41	57	19	19	14	25	25	23	971

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APPENDIX B

COVENANT GROUP SURVEY

COVENANT GROUP SURVEY

Please carefully read each question below. Circle the letter which most accurately indicates your feelings. Choose only one answer for each question.

1. Why do you attend Sunday Youth Christian Education?
   A. I want to learn more about the Bible and its value for my life.
   B. I attend because my friends are there.
   C. A parent (or guardian) requires that I attend.
   D. I have never attended Sunday Youth Christian Education.

2. How important is Bible study and spiritual growth to you personally?
   A. Very Important
   B. Fairly Important
   C. Not too important
   D. Not at all important

3. What is your relationship with your current Covenant Group? The leader:
   A. Shows interest through phone calls, notes and personal visits
   B. Expresses interest and concern while at church, and knows my name
   C. Does not know if I am there or not
   D. Does not know me because I do not attend

4. What is your relationship with peers in your Covenant Group? I feel:
    A. Loved, supported and comfortable expressing my opinions
    B. Accepted by most, but careful what I say
    C. Unaccepted and uncomfortable expressing any opinion
    D. I cannot answer, as I do not attend

5. Which of the following best describes the (Bible content) lesson material presented in your Covenant Group?
    A. Interesting, but too difficult
    B. Challenging, but interesting
    C. Boring because not relevant
    D. Do not attend so I cannot answer

6. Is the lesson material of your Covenant Group presented in interesting and creative way?
    A. Very interesting
    B. Fairly interesting
    C. Not at all interesting
    D. Do not attend so I cannot answer

7. How important do you believe your comments are to your Covenant Group?
    A. Very important
    B. Fairly important
    C. Not at all important
    D. Do not attend so I cannot answer

8. When would you prefer to attend youth Christian education?
    A. During the traditional morning hour
    B. At the same time as the morning worship service
    C. At the same time as the evening worship service
    D. Not interested in attending at anytime

9. What grade have you just completed? _____

10. Which are you, male or female?
    A. Male
    B. Female

Use the space below to make any additional comments or suggestions regarding youth Christian education.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX C

COVENANT GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please respond to each question below. Where it is appropriate, place a check before the answer that best describes you.

1. Has the Covenant Group experience increased your commitment to Christian education (and relationship to Jesus Christ)?

   A. ___ Yes, greatly!
   B. ___ Yes, some improvement
   C. ___ Not sure
   D. ___ Not at all

2. How often do you journal (write out your prayers, ask questions of the Biblical text, chronicle important spiritual events in your life)?

   A. ___ Daily
   B. ___ Three or four days a week
   C. ___ One or two days a week
   D. ___ Not at all

3. Give a specific example of how your Covenant Group experience (Christian education) has been applied in your daily life?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____